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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effectiveness of training programs for teaching assistants (TAs) in language courses at the University of Texas at Austin. The programs provided for these students, offered through various language departments, are designed to introduce the most important teaching methodologies and provide opportunities for TAs to gain teaching experience under close supervision. A survey of 33 TAs elicited biographical information, responses to the training, and perceptions of the characteristics of effective teaching. Results indicated an overall awareness among TAs of the importance of teacher training, and most agreed the programs did provide some training and gave necessary theoretical background and tools to understand their assignments. However, many wanted a more practical approach to teacher training, including more observation and feedback. Based on these findings and previous research, characteristics of an effective training program for language department TAs are outlined, and the importance of training is underlined. Contains 37 references. (MSE)

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An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Foreign Language Training Programs for TAs: An Exploratory Study

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An Investigation of the Effectiveness of Foreign Language Training Programs for TAs: An Exploratory Study

ZENA T. MOORE and BARBARA BRESSLAU

Training programs for Teaching Assistants have been in operation for over thirty years in many large state universities. Notwithstanding this fact, there is very little documented information on the effectiveness of the programs from the point of view of the TAs. The present study attempts to fill this gap by investigating what happens in foreign language department training programs at one large state university. Responses to a survey questionnaire by TAs revealed interdepartmental differences in effectiveness of training programs and suggestions as to their improvement. Specifically TAs believe that the programs should focus on practical pedagogical issues rather than on theoretical concerns and that the programs be ongoing rather than concentrated at the beginning of the semesters. Other needs include meaningful feedback on their teaching, skills for integrating material for classroom use, hands-on experience in audio-visual equipment, and more expertise on designing and scoring tests.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TASHIP

TAship, as a university phenomenon, has been traced back to the late 19th century when Johns Hopkins University created what was to be the first graduate school in the country. Johns Hopkins' first TA was a special instructor in foreign languages employed to provide undergraduate instruction in Latin and Greek, (Rudolph, 1962). The early TAships at Johns Hopkins, as well as at other major universities, were created principally as a way of attracting students to graduate schools by providing financial incentives. Interestingly, many of these early beneficiaries were not expected to render any services in return.

Half a century was to pass during which period TAs enjoyed this service-free financial support. By 1956, however, with the passing of the GI Bill, thousands of returning soldiers swelled the ranks of undergraduate enrollments in universities, especially in state universities. The increase in enrollment was so unprecedented that it was virtually impossible to hire assistant professors quickly enough to meet the expanding undergraduate population. This was particularly true in foreign language departments of large state institutions.

As a consequence of the increasingly large enrollments at the undergraduate level a corresponding need for teaching staff mushroomed. A group of students whose eventual goal was to become part of the collegiate environment provided an expedient and quick solution. Many titles described members of this new body of students/teachers. They were assistant lecturers, assistant instructors, readers, proctors and teaching fellows among others. Regardless of the title, large

institutions wooed these graduate students to provide a much demanded undergraduate instruction, a demand that continues unabated even to the present date, for according to the results of a recent survey, (Huber, 1992), foreign language departments have steadily increased the number of their TAs to match the increasing enrollments.

This nation-wide situation was described as a unique phenomenon of the modern research university, because the TA was simultaneously a teacher and a student. For a short while the efforts of TAs went uncriticised. Most universities operated on the assumption that TAs were just as qualified to teach as were certified teachers since both groups were holders of Bachelors' degrees with a major in a language. However, TAs generally qualified for employment based solely on their academic qualifications and enrollment in graduate school. That they had no training in pedagogy and did not have opportunities for pre-service and/or on the job training, as did student teachers with a Bachelors' degree, appeared to be insignificant.

The seeming insignificance attached to pedagogical skills as an essential requirement for teaching continued through the sixties. According to findings in the MLA 1963 survey conducted among 52 foreign language departments, 60% of the departments surveyed did not offer any type of training for TAs (Hagiwara, 1976). Challenges to and criticism of the lack of importance placed on the pedagogic qualifications came from several quarters.

The most vociferous complaints came from undergraduates across campuses about ineffective teaching assistants who lacked teaching skills, who could hardly speak English, and who were largely ignorant of the culture of the American schooling system. Large universities subsequently responded by instituting training programs designed to better equip the TAs with pedagogical skills, along with techniques and strategies for more effective teaching. The major challenge was to create programs that produced effective teachers in a minimum of time while maintaining the quality of instruction in lower level courses, (Hagiwara, 1976).

TRAINING PROGRAMS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENTS

For the following four decades program planners presented their course outlines and program details for public perusal, criticism and modeling For example, in 1957 Remak outlined the course for German TAs that was successfully implemented in his institute. Three years later, Winkelman (1960), described the Nebraska model also for German TAs. Natchman's 1963 program used in the French Department in an Illinois university followed, (Natchman, 1963), and in 1967 Dalbor having taken what he called a realistic look at the training of Spanish TAs in Penn State presented his recommendations for designing more effective training programs, (Dalbor, 1967). There was a lull in

the literature for the next nine years. Then in 1976 Hagiwara broke the silence with the publication of the program which the French Department used for TA training in Michigan, (Hagiwara, 1976). In that same year, Azevedo, (1976) described the benefits and vigorousness of the pre-service orientation program used to prepare Spanish TAs in Urbana.

Two major concerns guided training programs for TAs. One concern grew out of the widespread criticism of ineffective instruction, mentioned before. Undergraduates complained that their TAs were simply not good teachers. The second concern was for the TAs as students themselves (Azevedo, 1976, Remak 1957). University professors were troubled by the likelihood that the incoming MA and Ph. D. students might enter the professoriate without any systematic preparation in pedagogy. They felt that the institutions had to respond to the needs of the graduate students as well.

The following decade saw an increased awareness of the need to develop training programs of one sort or the other, notwithstanding some programmatic and administrative restrictions. Time was one of major structural restrictions. TAs generally came from other countries and could not be expected to be at the university long before the beginning of the semester without financial assistance. TA training, therefore, had to be conducted prior to the start of the semester, usually the week before classes commenced, and had to be ongoing for it to be effective. This was not always easy to achieve, for, although many universities recognized the need and importance of training programs for TAs, not many provided such training, (Hagiwara, 1976).

Furthermore it was found that TAs performed a wide range of duties that included, providing feedback, giving advice, acting as counselor, functioning as a tutor, preparing and administering tests, grading students' work, keeping students' records and providing instructional media services. The over-demanding range of duties expected of the TAs evoked resistance and complaints on the part of TAs and attracted the attention of supporters who saw TAs as objects of abuse and as sources of "cheap labor" (Sammons, 1976; Sykes, 1988), for while enrollment figures grew, faculty size did not. According to Huber, (1995), 67% of institutions with 50% increase in enrollment figures increased their part-time faculty by only 31% compared to the 50% increase of TAs. To date a strong correlation still exists between increased enrollments at the undergraduate level and increased numbers of TAs used for instruction (Azevedo, 1990).

Regardless of the reasons, be they to cut salary costs, or to provide real incentives through financial aid, the number of TAs continue to increase and TA training programs have become an institutionalized offering (Azevedo, 1990). During the 70s and the 80s heads of departments and TA supervisors evaluated their training programs and did indeed make recommendations and modifications (Schulz, 1980; Bennet, 1983; Di Donato, 1983; Azevedo, 1990; Magnan, 1993). Missing from the literature, however, is the lack of information on the effectiveness of these training programs from the TAs perspective. The work of

Ervin and Muyskens (1982), and more recently that of Gray and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1991) are among the few exceptions.

THE STUDY

The present study attempts to fill the gap in information about the effectiveness of training programs for TAs from the point of view of the TAs themselves. It is exploratory in nature since it focuses only on one large institute and on three main questions. The questions are:

1. What do TAs think of their training programs?
2. What do they perceive to be effective teaching?
3. Is there a fit between what is offered and what is needed?

The University of Texas at Austin responded to the needs of its TAs by instituting training programs, commonly referred to as 398T courses, in the departments of French and Italian, Germanic Languages, Spanish and Portuguese. The 389T course are designed to: 1) introduce the teaching assistant to the most important teaching methodologies and 2) provide opportunities for gaining teaching experience under the close supervision of the course instructor.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A survey questionnaire, presented in Appendix A, sought to elicit information in three categories: biographical information, responses to the training program and perceptions of the characteristics of an effective teacher. Most of the questions were intentionally open-ended to obtain insights into the topic. For purposes of this paper only data pertaining to the effectiveness of the training programs vis-a-vis the TAs' perceived needs will be discussed. Despite the shortcomings of the study, the information collected should give some insights to TAs' perceptions of their training programs.

A total number of 110 surveys were distributed among the departments of French and Italian (24), Germanic Languages (36) and Spanish and Portuguese (50). A total of 56 surveys were returned constituting a response rate of approximately 51%. Data from the completed questionnaires formed the base for analysis.

SURVEY FINDINGS

A. Effectiveness of the Training Programs: Interdepartmental comparison

Of the 56 informants who responded to the survey 33 did the training program. The remaining 23 indicated that they had taken a similar course at another

institution or had prior teaching experience, and thus were exempted from attending the training programs. While this number is admittedly small it may well be representative of the TA situation across foreign language departments.

Table 1 shows that of the 33 respondents, 24 (72%) said that the 398T course prepared them to teach at UT. Approximately 98% felt that it did present various approaches to language teaching, and approximately 91% stated that it helped them adjust to the teaching approach adopted by their department. Eighty-four percent believed that the course allowed for discussion of problems related to the classroom. Approximately 91% thought that the course helped them to understand language teaching better, and 84% felt that the course helped them to understand their departments' pedagogic approaches better.

Table 1. Responses of TAs in all Departments on Effectiveness of the 398T Course (In percentages. N=33)

Summary of Questions	YES	NO
Did the course prepare you for teaching at U.T.?	72	28
Did it discuss various approaches to teaching?	98	02
Did it allow for discussion of classroom problems?	84	16
Did it provide for a better understanding of teaching in general?	91	09
Did it allow for an understanding of the approaches adopted by the department?	91	09

Interdepartmental Comparisons

Table 2 reveals that in the Departments of French and Italian only ten (59%) of the 17 TAs took the 398T course, a very low figure compared to the 90% of TAs in the Department of Germanic Languages, and to the 75% in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. While 90% mentioned that the training course helped them to understand language teaching better, only 60% thought that it helped them to understand the teaching mission of their department, indicating an unclear departmental mission and/or the lack of articulation between objectives of the course and classroom practices. The relatively low responses of 60% to the question of an understanding of various approaches to language teaching and 59% to preparedness to teach in the department suggested that there was significant need for improvement in the course.

Table 2. Responses from the French and Italian TAs on Effectiveness of the 398T Course (In percentages N=17)

Summary of Questions	YES	NO
Did the course prepare you for teaching in the department?	59	41
Did it discuss various approaches to teaching?	60	40
Did it allow for discussion of classroom problems?	90	10
Did it provide for a better understanding of teaching in general?	90	10
Did it allow for an understanding of the approaches adopted by the department?	60	40

German Department

Table 3 shows consensus among the TAs in the German department. They all felt that the course discussed the various approaches to language teaching as well as the approach adopted by the department. They also all agreed that the course discussed classroom problems and that it gave them a better understanding of language teaching in general and of their department al approaches in particular and the majority of them, (90%), felt that it prepared them for teaching in the department.

Table 3. Responses from German TAs on Effectiveness of the 398T Course (In percentage N=20)

Summary of Questions	YES	NO
Did the course prepare you for teaching in the department?	90	10
Did you learn various approaches to teaching?	100	0
Did it allow for discussion of classroom problems?	100	0
Did it provide for a better understanding of teaching in general?	100	0
Did it allow for an understanding of language teaching in your department ?	100	0

Spanish and Portuguese Departments

Table 4 shows less consensus in responses of the Spanish and Portuguese departments. Seventy-seven percent believed that the 398T course prepared them for teaching in the department, and offered a better understanding of teaching in general. Eighty-five percent understood the departments' approaches to teaching and 92% indicated that they learnt various approaches to teaching. On the less

positive side, 46% felt that the course did not allow for discussions of problems arising in the classroom.

Table 4. Responses of TAs in Spanish and Portuguese Effectiveness of the 398T Course (In percentages N=13)

Summary of Questions	YES	NO
Did the course prepare you for teaching in the department?	77	23
Did you learn various approaches to teaching?	92	08
Did it allow for discussion of classroom problems?	54	46
Did it provide for a better understanding of teaching in general?	77	23
Did it allow for an understanding of language teaching in your department ?	85	15

Responses to Open-ended Question

Responses to the open-ended question in this section revealed complaints about the overly theoretical nature of the course. Almost all TAs expressed strong feelings that actual classroom experience should be more emphasized and that the course was helpful only to beginners, to prospective instructors with no experience at all. Almost all TAs in the Spanish and Portuguese felt that there should be separate courses for Spanish and Portuguese TAs since their individual concerns were not being addressed. TAs also criticized the overly strict supervision. Another major criticism was leveled at the types of tests administered by the department.

B. Characteristics of an Effective teacher

Responses to this section of the questionnaire fell into categories dealing with professional competencies, personal competencies and perceived needs of the TAs.

(a) Professional

The majority of TAs felt that language competence and cultural competence were the two most important qualifications for effective teaching. They felt that knowledge of the literature, a background in linguistics and a background in applied linguistics were helpful but were not as important as linguistic and cultural skills. They also indicated that knowledge about theories of second language acquisition, or of language teaching/learning were not essential for effective teaching.

The responses reflected similar concern about the overly theoretical nature of the training programs. On the one hand they expressed the need for hands-on experience and more practical experiences yet on the other they felt that active participation in workshops and training sessions were not their primary needs. Since most of the TAs were superior level speakers who had spent time in the target culture, it was not surprising that they would rate these skills in the way they did. At the same time, their responses to the effectiveness of the training programs appear to be contradictory to the responses to their professional competencies.

(b) Personal

Most respondents felt that maturity and a sense of responsibility were the two most important personal qualities of a good teacher. They also believed that teachers should have a commitment to teaching and be enthusiastic about their work in order to make language learning a positive and pleasant experience.

C. Needs

Most respondents stated that their greatest need was actual teaching practice. They felt that teacher training is a never-ending process, and although they believed that training did not necessarily make a good teacher, most of them believed in the importance of training, and more precisely in practical training. Again these responses were consistent with their criticisms of the departmental programs.

The second most commonly expressed need was for feedback on their teaching. Once again, this expressed need seemed to be directly connected to the need for more practical experiences. Respondents made several suggestions by which they could be given feedback. The use of videotaping for observation and evaluation was the most frequently recommended strategy. Peer evaluation was another.

Although the respondents did feel that they were qualified to teach, in that they felt they were proficient linguistically and culturally, they admitted that they needed pedagogic skills in at least four major areas of teaching. First, although they did have access to instructional supplementary material, they said that they lacked the skills necessary to effectively integrate the material into their lessons. Second, they said that they needed skills in teaching culture. Third, they felt that they would benefit if they had some insight into instructional psychology and fourth they needed training in conducting and grading tests in general and oral tests in particular.

In the final category of the questionnaire which sought open comments in general, the most frequently cited complaint was overworked. The informants felt that teaching up to ten hours per semester and having large classes only made their teaching less effective. Fewer and smaller classes would provide them with

the opportunity to introduce a more communicative approach and could even be more effective than additional training. Another complaint was about the university's policy regarding TAs. The third most frequently cited complaint was the low salary. TAs felt that they were performing a vital role and financial remuneration should reflect the university's recognition of their important service. Finally, TAs expressed the need for counseling services that would allow them opportunities to discuss students' problems professionally and confidentially.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION: THE FIT

The responses to the survey indicated an overall awareness of the importance of teacher training. The majority of the informants agreed that the 398T courses do achieve the objectives by providing them with some training and in giving them the necessary theoretical background and tools to understand their assignment within their respective departments. At the same time, however, an impressive number of respondents wanted a more practical approach to teacher training, perhaps indicating that the short course undertaken before the classes commenced should be an orientation and an introduction, but that the training will be more effective and applicable if it is ongoing with direct connections between classroom practice and methodology.

The TAs felt that there was not enough observation and especially not enough feedback on the observation. Several types of observation were suggested: observation of their own classes by supervisors and peers, observation of peers, watching videos of classes taught by other instructors, and watching videos of their own performance. Suggestions from fellow instructors and the feedback given by their students seemed to be more valuable than theoretical knowledge of approaches to teaching. This implies that more effective teacher training should turn more towards the classroom and utilize observations and discussions of videotaped classes as useful training devices.

Some instructors also mentioned that the 398T courses might be too content specific, and that they would appreciate training that went beyond first semester courses and the institution. The concern with the quality of the instruction was further demonstrated in the solicitation of extra-materials, such as videos, pictures, realia to make instruction more interesting and meaningful. Nevertheless, they recognized that having instructional material was not enough. They needed to know how to use the material effectively and how to make instruction meaningful to the students.

While the respondents acknowledged the importance of the theoretical component of the courses, they expressed the belief that they would benefit from more emphasis on the practical component. They did see themselves as involved in an ongoing process with the training course as a part of this process and not

the ultimate answer to it. In certain departments excessive workload and large numbers of students per class were linked to ineffective teaching .

Overall, the results of the survey demonstrated that the informants believed that they had the academic qualifications to teach, that they were personally committed to their teaching, that they were aware of their responsibilities as teachers, knowledgeable about various approaches to language teaching, but they were not fully satisfied that the training programs were catering to their major needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

If the present trends continue, TAs will assume even greater responsibility for the task of preparing our language majors and consequently our future language teachers (Azevedo, 1990). Almost three decades ago, Freeman (1966) suggested that Foreign Language departments might want to consider creating special institutes for the preparation of their TAs if they hoped to improve the quality of foreign language. At that time the suggestion appeared too unrealistic.

Given the fact that in over 70% of the nation's school districts teachers are presently charged with teaching students a foreign language, (Schrier 1994), foreign language departments must ask themselves whether they should be concerned with their influence on the development of these teachers. The findings from this exploratory study suggest that it is imperative that we give as much attention and prestige to pedagogy as we do to studies in literature, since the status has not changed much over the last two decades. Although there has been an increase in the level of academic qualifications of those directly involved with TA training and supervision (Schulz, 1983), they are still underpaid, overworked, non-tenure track instructors and/or lecturers, (Azevedo, 1990). The findings from the study show that our language majors, who most likely will be the future teachers, are being taught by TAs. If it is accepted that teachers teach as they were taught then a strong case must be made for more effective teaching at the university level by TAs.

Prior to 1963 relatively little was done to train and supervise TAs, (Di Donato, 1983). To date there has been a slow but noticeable change, (Shulz, 1979; Gibaldi and Mirollo, 1981). Universities, nevertheless, must continue their efforts to provide proper incentives for the supervisors and trainers of TAs. But more importantly, they have to develop training programs that are more effective. The traditional single course, like the 389T course in this study, accompanied by a one-week an orientation program is totally inadequate, since most of the time is spent on administrative rather than pedagogic concerns, (Magnan, 1993). An effective training program must include the following:

i) A pre-service workshop to orient TAs

ii) An inservice program with a methods course either offered by the foreign language department or by the education department.
iii) Regular classroom observation with feedback.
iv) Practice teaching with feedback.
v) Video-taped classes to provide for self evaluation and reflection.
vi) Team- teaching.
vii) Classroom observation of their peers
viii) Training in designing, administering and scoring classroom tests.

Finally, foreign language departments should employ only the best to teach lower level courses. The best will be linguistically competent, have superior knowledge of the culture, know how to integrate language and culture and know how to effectively use technology in instruction, (Rivers, 1983; Hancock 1981; Lafayette, 1983; Stein, 1966). Training programs for TAs must be redesigned to expose the future teachers to "teaching as a problem-solving skill", not just to prepare them to deliver departmental courses. TAs as future language teachers must have opportunities to develop "decision-making skills" (Strasheim, 1984; Stern, 1983b), in addition to pedagogic skills. Training programs must produce teachers who are "reflective practitioners" and should shift towards a "more socially oriented knowledge base", exposing them to a more critical perspective that would permit them to analyze and critique current teaching practices (Hudelson and Faltis 1993). Such training programs have the potential not only to produce highly motivated teachers but also to reduce attribution rates and to increase student enrollment, (Henderson, 1985). Universities should also make it mandatory that their training programs be evaluated externally and internally. All these changes call for greater collaboration between colleges of education and colleges of humanities.

More detailed research on training programs offered in universities for the TAs is obviously needed but there should be no doubt about the necessity of instituting teacher preparation courses at the graduate level as recommended by Oksenholt in 1963 and as obtained in many universities. As Rivers argued, preparation should be considered "a necessity, not a luxury", (1983b, 330). With the implementation of the National Standards (ACFTL 1995), we can expect that the need for TAs will probably be on the increase. The consequent demand will be to develop a more progressive approach to how we view pedagogy and an even more revolutionary way of how we define foreign language teacher education.

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APPENDIX A

This survey is meant to gather information about the Training Programs for Foreign Language TAs.

Please take some time to answer the questionnaire.

A . General Info

1. Please describe your status: _____
2. What language do you teach: _____
3. Please describe your duties and responsibilities in your department.
   a._____
   b._____
   c._____
   d._____

B. Teaching experience:

1. How many semesters have you taught in your department?_____
2. Which courses have you taught / are you teaching?_____
3. How many times have you taught each course?_____
4. Did you have any teaching experience prior to UT? YES NO
   If yes, where, for how long, and what type of courses did you teach?
   _____

C. The 398T Course

1. Have you taken the 398T course that your department offers? YES NO

If yes, please check the appropriate answer:
- the course prepares the TAs for teaching in your department YES NO
- the course discusses various approaches to language teaching. YES NO
- the course discusses the teaching approach of the department YES NO
- the course discusses problems that arise in the classroom YES NO
- the course helps in a better understanding of language teaching YES NO
-other,describe: _____

2. If you answered NO to any of the above, please explain why.
_____

D. Characteristics of a Good Teacher

1. What, in your opinion, are the characteristics of a good teacher. Please rank the items below, starting with 1 for the item you consider most important.

(a) Competencies: Professional
____ mastery of the language
____ knowledge of the culture(s) in which the language is used
____ knowledge of the literature(s) written in the language
____ solid background in linguistics
____ solid background in applied linguistics
____ solid background in second language acquisition
____ awareness of the current discussions on language teaching/learning
____ active participation in workshops, training sessions, conferences
____ other, describe:

(b) Personal

____ self-confidence	____ leadership	____ objectivity
____ kindness	____ humor	____ organization
____ strictness	____ authority	____ ability to listen
____ friendliness	____ humility	____ punctuality
____ neatness	____ confidence	____ enthusiasm
____ patience	____ availability to students	
____ other, describe:		

E. Needs

1. What, in your opinion, are the needs of a TA. Please rank the items below, starting with 1 for the item you consider most important.
____ pre-service training
____ in-service training
____ possibilities for continuous language training
____ offerings in methodology courses
____ active assistance from coordinator

____ good teaching materials
____ well designed courses / syllabi
____ well equipped classrooms (tape recorder, VCR, etc.)
____ financial assistance to attend training workshops and courses
____ financial assistance to attend language courses abroad
____ other, describe:

F. Any other comments:

Many Thanks for your Cooperation!